

France: What is the LCR's New Anti-Capitalist Party?

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The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) is holding a special congress on February 5-8 to dissolve its organization and, in its place, to found the New Anti-Capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste, NPA). According to the LCR's own documents, the NPA will renounce a socialist orientation to the working class and the revolutionary struggle for a workers government, while orienting itself to a broad political milieu including tendencies that explicitly oppose revolution.

The political platform proposed for the congress by the majority of the LCR's political committee explains: "The NPA does not claim a specific relation to Trotskyism, but continuity with those who, over the last two centuries, have confronted the system all the way. The NPA is a pluralistic and democratic party. [There has been] participation of comrades from various components of the social movement, of the anti-globalization left, of political ecology, of comrades from the PS [the Socialist Party, a left party of bourgeois government] and the PCF [the French Communist Party, its main coalition partner], from the anarchist movement, from the revolutionary left. Without becoming bland, the NPA has everything to win by opening itself even further."

The eruption last fall of a global capitalist crisis that once again poses the question of social revolution has caught the LCR flat-footed. As always, however, the LCR's response has a political logic: the evolution of a non-Marxist organization is intersecting with the changing requirements of bourgeois politics.

Authoritative voices of the European bourgeoisie are calling for a rearrangement of the left. In a January 5 column, "Reinventing the European left," the *Financial Times* said: "European left parties remain prisoners of their past, obsessed with anachronistic ideology..." After calling on the left parties to make new political appeals to the population, it concluded: "Some of this new agenda may have little to do with old school socialism. So much the better."

Especially with the development of the economic crisis and the outbreak across Europe of mass public protests against social austerity policies and financial criminality, the project of finding new political barriers against the mobilization of the working class takes on great urgency. French right-wing commentator Guy Sorman wrote in an editorial in the British *Guardian*, "the hollowing out of socialism has a consequence. To paraphrase Marx, a spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of chaos."

To be part of the bourgeoisie's realignment of the left, the LCR must make clear they are breaking whatever tenuous association they had with revolutionary politics. To the extent that the LCR is publicly identified with Trotskyism, this is an obstacle to the sharp swing to the right that the LCR anticipates it will carry out in collaboration with the trade unions, the Socialist Party, and other forces of the French political establishment.

The LCR's real target in liquidating itself is, in fact, Trotsky's political heritage: an insistence on the complete political independence of the working class, revolutionary internationalism, and an irreconcilable opposition to collaboration with the bourgeois state, the Stalinist and social-democratic bureaucracies, and all brands of bourgeois nationalism

and petty-bourgeois radicalism.

The LCR's selection of anti-capitalism as its guiding ideology is, in the context of European and especially French politics, a colossal step backwards and to the right, towards the cheapest coin of the realm. Politically indistinct, it embraces all manners of social discontent, regardless of class basis or orientation. It is a term that can be embraced in large sections of the petty-bourgeoisie, both left and right—everything from the anarchism proposed by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the mid-19th century to the violent right-populist protests of Pierre Poujade of the mid-20th.

With French President Nicolas Sarkozy's call for a "New World, New Capitalism," which decried a "crisis of financial capitalism" and called for capitalism's "refoundation," it seems the closet sympathizers of "anti-capitalism" include the president himself!

The LCR's political abandonment of a "relation to Trotsky" marks a political milestone, but nonetheless arises organically from the LCR's history. If examined in the context of the principles articulated by Trotsky in the struggle against Stalinism and to found the Fourth International, the LCR was never a Trotskyist party. In fact, the LCR was the product of a split from the Fourth International in 1953.

The LCR's forebear, the minority of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCI), split from Trotskyism under the political leadership of Michel Pablo, Ernest Mandel, and Pierre Frank, on the basis of an orientation to the Stalinist parties. They rejected Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy as a counterrevolutionary force: the Soviet bureaucracy could, they claimed, be pushed to the left. As a corollary of this international abandonment of the struggle to build independent revolutionary parties, defining the Fourth International instead as a pressure group on existing mass parties, they oriented themselves essentially to the PCF.

Their opportunist politics—a method of uncritically adapting to whatever moods dominated in existing mass movements—set the stage for a broader accommodation to petty-bourgeois radicalism and student protest politics as they emerged in the 1960s. This allowed them to merge with split-offs from the politically heterogeneous UEC (Union of Communist Students, a Stalinist youth movement, sections of which were also attracted to the politics of Mao and Che Guevara). The LCR's future leader, Alain Krivine, had been expelled from the UEC in 1965 and had founded the JCR (Revolutionary Communist Youth) the next year. After a few changes of name, the organization arising from the merger between the PCI and the UEC split-offs has been known as the LCR since the 1970s.

However much its program diverged from and even repudiated the conceptions of Trotsky, the LCR nevertheless was careful to retain a certain association with the image of the great revolutionary leader. It gave prestige to the LCR and helped maintain its authority with sections of workers and radical students for whom Trotsky represented, in opposition to the PCF, genuinely revolutionary ideals and program. This association with Trotsky was, however, of a fundamentally superficial

character.

The LCR remained—in composition, social orientation, and political program—a petty-bourgeois organization. Both the PCI minority and the UEC had been strongly oriented towards bourgeois nationalism, and Pablo himself became an advisor of the Algerian National Liberation Front and the bourgeois PASOK party in Greece. The LCR's "Trotsky-Guevarism," as it was popularly called, led it to embrace different varieties of identity and middle-class environmentalist politics.

The LCR leadership itself recognizes that the LCR's latest shift arises from its long-standing petty-bourgeois orientation. In a December 2008 statement, "From the LCR to the NPA," its principal leaders (including Alain Krivine, François Sabado, philosopher Daniel Bensaid, and spokeswoman Roselyne Vachetta) wrote: "It is no accident that—of all the groups within the French and even international revolutionary left—it is the LCR that has taken such an initiative [to found the NPA]. We are the product of a particular history of the revolutionary movement—the fusion of a current of Trotskyism with the youth radicalization of the 1960s."

They add, "Unlike other currents, we have endeavored to incorporate a wide range of new factors into our political tradition: the post-war evolution of capitalism; active solidarity with the anti-colonial revolutions and with the anti-bureaucratic movements in the Eastern bloc; an analysis of the new social movements such as the women's movement and, today, growing eco-socialist awareness in the face of the ecological crisis; and, above all, ongoing examination and enrichment of one of the key points of our program, socialist democracy."

Another important element of the LCR's turn to "anti-capitalism" is the extensive network of contacts it developed during the 1980s and 1990s at the highest levels of the French bourgeois media and political apparatus. François Mitterrand's 1981-1995 presidency marked a definite change of political climate from the 1970s. The masses' immense hopes upon Mitterrand's election were dashed when he embarked in 1983 on an austerity policy designed to limit wage increases. In this period the LCR began to evolve, in line with other ex-student radical groups, into a hermaphroditic organization with traits of both a protest group and an establishment party.

Many one-time LCR members made their way into the PS, where they now occupy high positions: Henri Weber, now a top associate of ex-Prime Minister Laurent Fabius; Julien Dray, the former leader of the LCR's student Union Action Movement (MAS), now one of the main counselors of 2007 PS presidential candidate Ségolène Royal; and Gérard Filoche, who left the LCR in the early 1990s and now plays an important role in the PS's contacts with trade union officials. Another LCR member, Edwy Plenel, left in the early 1980s, ultimately becoming the editor of France's daily of record, *Le Monde*.

The leftward shift in the political climate after the November-December 1995 mass rail strikes drove the LCR into direct collaboration with France's main bourgeois parties. It is a sign of the LCR's basic duplicity that it does not discuss its deals with the bourgeois parties in its press or before its broader membership, while it often affects intransigent opposition to the PS. While these relations are rarely discussed in the French bourgeois media, they are widely referenced in books on the LCR, including those sold in the LCR's own bookstore.

As the 1997-2002 government of Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin discredited itself with its right-wing austerity and privatization programs, it quietly undertook negotiations with the LCR. Significantly, Jospin himself rose to the position of prime minister from his political beginnings in another revisionist, ex-Trotskyist party, the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI) led by Pierre Lambert—now the Independent Workers Party (POI).

In secret negotiations in the lead-up to the 2002 presidential elections, the LCR took up the role of a political cover for the PS. The PS agreed to help place LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot on the ballot

and arrange favorable media coverage for him, in exchange the LCR promised to help Jospin's image with left voters in its statements leading up to the second round of the election. In the event, the PS and LCR miscalculated, and the unpopular Jospin was eliminated in the first round, leading to a second round between the conservative Chirac and neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Rather than appealing for a boycott when the electoral system stood discredited before large sections of the population, the LCR aligned with the bourgeoisie in calling for a Chirac vote.

After Chirac was elected, the LCR betrayed the mass strike movements against his social policies. Though it was seen as an important political voice on the "far left," it carefully abstained from fighting to take the leadership of the struggles out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy, who promptly sold out the strikes. In the meantime, Besancenot received non-stop coverage in the news and even celebrity shows on television and other mass media.

As the LCR's François Sabado laid out in a December 2004 article titled "Building broad anti-capitalist parties—a necessary step," the LCR insisted that its main task was to organize a common strategy with the trade unions and France's bourgeois left. While it was prepared to issue limited criticisms of what it called the inaction of the trade unions and the PS, who were both fundamentally hostile to workers' strikes against Chirac, it refused to take any action that entailed a definitive break with either one.

Of course, Sabado knows well that the PS is a bourgeois party discredited before the masses. Adopting the cynical style of obfuscation developed by university professors fed on Foucault and Derrida and adopted wholesale by the LCR, he wrote: "Under the pressures of neoliberal capitalist globalization, social democracy has undergone a process of 'social-liberalization,' with a rightward shift in its politics and an advanced social interpenetration of its leadership with the highest levels of administration and the capitalist summits. We have noted that this process leads—in an uneven fashion—to the de-linking of significant sectors of the popular classes from the organizations of the traditional left."

The LCR's entire history and perspective is built, however, on complex collaboration with the bourgeois parties, which is also at the heart of the NPA project. In a section titled "Anti-capitalist politics," Sabado wrote that revolutionaries "must reaffirm a policy of unity and class independence.... Our stand against the government and against the right—unity of action of all the social, trade union, and political left—was first concretized in the struggles." In case anyone had failed to understand that this meant unity with the PS as well, Sabado added, "We do not think that the Socialist Parties [of Europe] have become bourgeois parties."

This is simply an absurd statement. The old Socialist parties, as the revolutionaries of the time insisted, irrevocably demonstrated their bourgeois character in 1914 by voting for war credits at the beginning of World War I. In relation to these old, mass parties, however, today's PS marks a decided shift to the right: it was founded at the 1971 Epinay Congress as the personal electoral vehicle for a bourgeois politician, François Mitterrand, whose dubious political career began in right-wing anti-Semitic organizations and included a stint as a minor official in the collaborationist Vichy regime during the Occupation.

The more immediate context for launching the NPA project was a temporary alignment on the bourgeois right.

The LCR launched the NPA project immediately after Sarkozy's defeated the PS's Ségolène Royal in the second round of the May 2007 presidential elections. The bourgeois press spoke happily of the "rupture" in France's social compact that Sarkozy would carry out. The LCR sensed that a Sarkozy government would expose even more sharply than before the vacuum on the left, and sought through the NPA to carry out a certain regroupment inside the French left establishment.

The LCR leadership's repeated, favorable references to the 1936-1938 Popular Front government are indicative of what they expect such a regroupment to produce. The Popular Front was, in fact, one of the most tragic and shameful chapters in the history of the working class. According to the Popular Front strategy, advocated by the Stalinist bureaucracy and adopted by bourgeois politicians in Western Europe, the mass working class parties were to ally with the bourgeois left, ostensibly as a barrier against fascism. In France, the Socialist Party (with the tacit collaboration of the PCF) joined the bourgeois Radical Party in government in 1936. With the help of the PCF, it forced a general strike by the workers back to work, in exchange for granting social concessions formalized in the Matignon Accords.

This defeat created a mood of intense popular demoralization and a resurgence of open fascist sentiment in the French officer corps and the broader bourgeoisie, which spoke of the need to "kill the bitch"—i.e., the Republic that, unlike the Nazi regime, had been unable to prevent and fully strangle all movements of the working class. In Spain, the Popular Front tied the revolutionary workers to the bourgeois government of the Spanish Republic and led to their defeat in the Spanish Civil War. These events, by taking revolution off the immediate political agenda in Europe, greatly stabilized Hitler's Nazi regime and paved the way for the outbreak of World War II, and the French bourgeoisie's capitulation to and collaboration with the Nazis during the Occupation.

The LCR's ambiguous and evasive formulations on the question of the Popular Front and state power cannot conceal, however, their preparations for entry into bourgeois governments.

In a June 2008 interview with PCF spokesman Olivier Dartigolles, Sabado said: "It is not a question of refusing all participation in government, we clearly situate ourselves in a perspective of government power, but this government must be the product of social movements, of political balances of forces." Sabado added, "The main conquests in this country were carried out by one or another government, but they were the product of general strikes, of revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situations." He mentioned the example of "paid vacations, the 40-hour workweek, or the nationalizations" granted by the Popular Front.

Krivine articulated this same perspective, with the combination of dishonesty and cynicism of which he is a past master, in a December 2007 round-table discussion with several PS politicians, including the ex-LCR Henri Weber: "The first question I ask you: can we deal with [social inequality] by concrete measures that imply a new redistribution of wealth? The second question is that of means: the great reforms in France, those of the [1936] Popular Front, of the Liberation, of 1968, the victory against the First Job Contract, never came directly from parliaments. They came because millions of people went into the street, launched a general strike, booted your buttocks."

All these demagogic statements pass over the fact that the 1936 general strike was betrayed by Stalinism and the CGT, left the bourgeoisie in power, and paved the way for subsequent defeats. With these comments, the LCR shows that it stands on the other side of the barricades. Trotsky denounced the Popular Front as a counterrevolutionary alliance of bourgeois liberalism with the GPU, the Stalinist secret police. He relentlessly criticized its policies as a betrayal of the historic, revolutionary interests of the working class and the most complex and dangerous form of counterrevolutionary strategy.

The fullest statement of the LCR's plans, however, was laid out shortly after it launched the NPA project, in a July 2007 statement titled "Elements of Revolutionary Strategy."

The statement began by denying the likelihood of a global crisis of capitalism, quoting Ernest Mandel: "When we evoke the epoch of revolutions, that does not at all mean that no further development of the productive forces would be possible without the fall of this mode of production. It means only that, from this point of view, the productive

forces which continue to develop enter into increasingly open rebellion with the existing mode of production and contribute to its downfall." It added: "Mandel rejects any mechanical or catastrophist interpretation of the formulas of Marx."

Having prematurely discounted the likelihood of capitalist crisis, it proceeded to the need for a political alliance with the "social-liberal" bourgeoisie: "The question of the united front is a central question in a country like France in 2006, but it is not posed in the same terms as before 1968, after 1968, or today, with the social-liberal evolution of the workers' movement, the crisis of the PCF, and the new spaces for an anti-capitalist policy." Despite the "social-liberal," i.e., bourgeois, character of these forces, it added, "striving for the unity of the workers and their organizations is a permanent element of the politics of revolutionaries."

The statement then described at some length its theoretical conception of how to carry out political struggle. It began with the general strike, which it described as "a central element of our strategy." Though France had at that time seen two strike movements mobilize millions of people over the previous five years, and large-scale strikes would come in each of the next three years, it baldly asserted: "Today, the relationship of forces between the classes in Europe does not put the outbreak of such general strikes on the agenda."

It noted that the general strike immediately raises the question of "a perspective of governmental power." However, it did not want to puncture too many illusions about protest politics, adding: "Of course, throughout the history of social struggles, many reforms, new rights, social conquests were obtained under the pressure of relationships of forces and social mobilizations ... without taking power!"

This perspective of not challenging the bourgeoisie comes out most clearly in the LCR's definition of a workers government.

In the lexicon of Marxism, the meaning of a workers government is quite clear: it denotes a state based on popular organs created by the working class in the course of mass struggles against capitalism. The LCR, of course, has a different interpretation: "The workers government is a transitional governmental formula, in a situation of crisis where the institutions of the old state apparatus are not yet destroyed. It is not yet the power of popular organs or the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' but it is no longer the normal functioning of bourgeois institutions.... It is a possible intermediate government, on the road to the conquest of power by the workers."

Trotsky dealt with such claims long ago. He placed the demand for workers government in the *Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, in order to popularize the notion of the proletariat's struggle for state power. He explicitly rejected the claim that a workers government represented a halfway house allying the working class to the bourgeois state.

Unable to pass over in silence the fact that an alliance with ruling parties of the French bourgeoisie constitutes a complete break with revolutionary Marxism, the LCR's statement argues that the revolutionary experiences of the past are irrelevant to the present period: "It is by referring to Russia from February to October 1917, and Germany between 1918 and 1923, that Trotsky uses his formulations 'demanding that workers' parties break with the bourgeoisie.' But these formulas have today been relativized by history."

This reactionary program outlines the LCR's preparation to play an explicitly counterrevolutionary role in conjunction with the PS, PCF, and other organizations of the French left establishment, against an increasingly radicalized population. In the mass struggles that are inevitably approaching in France, the NPA will prove to be a determined defender of the bourgeois state and an implacable enemy of the working class.



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